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Giles Coren reviews the Swan, Oxfordshire

GILES COREN

'Just because medieval stone buildings have not been ripped out and replaced with warehouses and crack dens doesn't make a place "twee"'



Listen, I like the Cotswolds. No. I love them. And I am just not going to apologise for it. Restaurant critics only started being mean about them in reviews because they wanted to impress AA Gill. But Adrian only hated the Cotswolds because he was jealous when his mate Clarkson started going there at weekends and left him seething in South Ken with nothing to do.

So then when Adrian did go out to the Cotswolds to stay with his rich pals in their lovely houses, he didn't want to be seen to have backed down or behaved hypocritically in any way. Adrian was not one to grovel.

So he slammed the Cotswolds even more. Accepted his friends' hospitality, went to their local pubs and restaurants and gave them three times the hammering they deserved simply because the people he loved, loved them. He was a complex man, was Adrian. Genius often is. But he misled people about the Cotswolds.

I fell for it myself. I went down to the Wild Rabbit when it opened in Kingham in 2012 or 2013 and I looked at it, I couldn't help myself, through Adrian's eyes. Adrian's all-seeing, gimlet eyes - like Kaa from *The Jungle Book* - half-lidded in the corner of the oak-beamed room, darting angrily from side to side while he sipped a ridiculous mocktail through a novelty straw, watching his mates get pissed and stupid, checking with disdain the pea gravel in the car park, the expanse of black Range Rovers, the gleaming green Hunter wellies, the box-fresh Barbour jackets, the plastic surgery, the oligarchical wine list, the Kilner jars of foraged dandelion kimchi ... and I smashed it to pieces. And then the following week I went to the Plough, a few doors down, and smashed that, too. Just to fit in. Just to be part of the we-hate-the-Cotswolds restaurant critic set.

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What a dick. Because about a year later, I bought a house there. And of course I can never go into either of them now. I didn't buy in the smart bit, in Oxfordshire, but further west into Gloucestershire, deep in the AONB (area of outstanding natural beauty). "Take the A40 past Burford," I told people, "and drive until you think I could afford a house." It's about half an hour, give or take. And it's blooming lovely.

I'm sorry (damn, I wasn't going to apologise), but there is nothing wrong with a place being pretty. Just because medieval stone buildings have not been ripped out and replaced with warehouses and crack dens doesn't make a place "twee". And "chocolate boxy" just doesn't mean a thing. Most chocolate assortments come in boxes of one primary colour with a big brand name on it. And the Cotswolds do not look like that.

There is nothing wrong with villages being kept tidy and full of flowers. There is nothing wrong with farming or horses or corduroy trousers. There is nothing wrong with middle-class people. There is nothing wrong with rural people. There is nothing wrong with white people. There is nothing wrong with ruddy faces or local newspapers or warm beer or Laurie Lee or morris dancing. There is nothing wrong with voting Conservative.

Or playing cricket. A place doesn't become okay only when it is poor and overcrowded and dangerous and polyglot and bears no resemblance to anything it has been in the past 100 or 500 or 1,000 years. That's just snobbery, that's all. It comes from the top and it comes from the bottom and it all points at the Cotswolds and sneers and it's just stupid and I'm not going to stand for it.



The Swan, Ascott-under-Wychwood
CHRIS TERRY

So when I say that I went to the Swan at Ascott-under-Wychwood (fnarr-fnarr, what a posh-sounding village, I bet they all went to boarding school) and that that's a great big, newly upgraded, spanking bloody excellent Cotswolds pub, I mean that as about the biggest compliment I can muster.

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Like Peter Creed's Bell Inn at Langford (a huge favourite of mine), the Swan benefits from a brilliant pub man who joined from the local Lucky Onion group of pubs and restaurants, Sam Pearman. I first knew Sam and Peter from the Wheatsheaf in Northleach a few years ago, which I believe is still in Lucky Onion hands, and also the Chequers in Churchill, which is not, it having been bought by the same wealthy local benefactors as the Swan, ostensibly to "preserve it for the community" but essentially "to make sure it stays nice for us and our pals" - which is exactly what I would do if I had pub-buying money.

And this is exactly how I'd do it. Or ask Sam to do it. It's been beautifully painted and polished, in all its reassuring vastness, in aristocratic greys and greens, so that it holds deep, sheltering cool on a raging hot summer's day like a serious old country house, while out in the huge courtyard the sun beats down on dozens of tables and plenty of space for the kids to run around.

Two walls of the courtyard are half-roofed and we took shelter there in the shade with some friends and went hard at the big, creamy A3 menu, which is a kitchen-sink affair of the new school - mains, roasts, sharing plates, pies, breads, starters, all of it local, hearty and modern - as opposed to the old school, in which the arrival in provincial pub dining rooms of deep-frozen lasagnes, Thai curries and cottage pies was hailed by the incessant ping of the microwave.

So after pints of cider and Hooky from just down the road, it was chopped hanger steak with fresh horseradish and big crispy croutons laid over it with capers, parsley and a cool, sweet tomato dressing, tuna tartare cubed quite large with avocado and wasabi, scattered seeds and a pile of pink pickled ginger, asparagus spears with some fresh peas, Cantabrian anchovies and hazelnuts, all cool and crisp under a warm, runny coddled egg and a possibly somewhat overfiddled plate of crab meat with a boiled egg, separated and grated into separate piles of white and yellow, with colourful splashes of other adornments - you could just sling someone a plate of picked crab and some toast and they'd be delighted.

It's all very good English stuff (with some exotic twists) and fresh and tasty, but I think the presentation is one notch up from what it needs to be in a big old (beautiful) country pub. It's not that they've done it wrong. It's just that I wouldn't have bothered. But then, who'd come to my restaurant?

The best of the starters, for me, was the bowl of barbecued native prawns with more of those lovely peas in a rich, spicy, yabbering sauce of garlic butter and Chipping Norton 'nduja. Yes, Chipping Norton 'nduja - even I laughed. Heaven knows what Adrian would have done. But it was perfectly judged in its summer heartiness and not overpresented at all, just slung down in front of you like they would in Spain, a meaty shellfish dish with delirious porky fish juices in the bottom and real Mediterranean heft. Adrian would have loved it.

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The roast pork that I didn't eat was well received by my mate Charlie but looked to me, again, a little artful: pretty slices of loin with their ribbon of pale fat, rhombuses of excellent crackling, crisp roast potatoes, a slightly incongruous Yorkshire pudding. As good a pub roast as you'll get, yes, but a notch posher than it needs to be. A polite roast. It could be a little dirtier. I'm asking a lot here but I don't think I'm wrong.

Tall, proud, free-standing pies went by (Huntsam Farm Middle White and chicken and leek) and were regretted by us all - it was as hot as Rabat on the terrace that day and no one thought to order a pie - but Esther and I were on the "sharing" baked potatoes with an unctuous stew of super-surrendered Paddock Farm beef cheeks in a bourguignonne gravy (one for a winter repeat, I feel) and a tarte flambée from the "For the table" section, covered with local Rollright cheese, roasted garlic and grated truffle.

There was lots of shimmering fresh veg, a roasted half cauliflower with garlic mayonnaise, multicoloured knickerbocker glories for the kids ... In short, a gallimaufry, a great massive hotch-potch of reimagined pub classics, mostly brilliant, and just how I like to eat at weekends: lots of people, a pint, a glass or two of wine, too much food, then some more food, then a stagger back through the Cotswolds to pass out on the grass somewhere. And if you don't like it, I'm in Dumfries next. So that'll shut you up.

The Swan

*4 Shipton Road, Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire (01993 832332;
countrycreatures.com)*

Cooking 7

Service 9

Cotswolds 10

Score 8.67

Price £45/head

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